

SOME KEY AIMM DECISIONS OF THE PAST

by Jim Bertsche

In the course of CIM/AIMM's ninety plus years of ministry in Africa, numerous critical decisions have pointed direction and shaped its subsequent history. This article highlights only a few of them, some of which ran counter to prevailing wisdom of the time.

The launching of an inter-Mennonite witness in Africa broke new ground. Sharing a common burden and vision for Africa and realizing that the demands upon them for material and human resources would be high, two small Mennonite denominations agreed to pool their resources to forge a common cause. They set aside any intent of planting American Mennonite denominational churches. The prayer was rather that from their witness there might one day simply emerge an African Mennonite Church.

The vision of an inter-tribal church. Eventually settling in a geographical area of south central Congo equivalent in size to the state of Illinois, the pioneers found themselves amidst five major tribal groups and marginal contacts with still more. A long history of animosity and conflict existed between some of the tribes. It would have been very easy to go about planting tribal churches, each developing independently from the others. But there was early insistence that regardless of their bitter history, converts from all tribes be encouraged to discover one another as brothers and sisters in a common faith and in devotion to the same Lord and Savior.

The conviction that Africans should be the evangelists of their own people. In some areas of Africa, missionaries long did the preaching in western languages such as English, French or Dutch relying upon Africans for translation, feeling, apparently, that this was necessary in order to convey a "pure" Gospel. Although CIM pioneers had not benefitted from courses in cross-cultural communication, they nonetheless instinctively knew that once touched by God's grace and given Biblical instruction, the Africans could make use of cultural touchstones such as tribal history, proverbs, customs, fears, idiom and traditions with an effectiveness that few, if any missionaries, could hope to match. Africans early exerted major influence in matters of church discipline, the screening of baptismal candidates and the choice and placement of evangelists.

The Djoko consultation of 1960. The CIM began its work in the Congo under the Belgian colonial regime. By the late 1950's winds of change were blowing with gale force all across colonial Africa but the Belgians seemed not to take note. At the time the CIM was

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blessed with an astute executive secretary in the home office named Harvey Driver. Through travel and reading he accurately sensed that change was coming in Africa and that it was urgently important that CIM, both board and missionary staff, prepare for change. In January, 1960 a board delegation arrived at Djoko Punda, the original mission post established in 1912. African church leaders were brought to that station from all directions. In an unhurried format over several days time, the delegation and missionaries invited their African colleagues to lay serious groundwork for the time when missionaries might no longer be able to stay with them. After expressing their initial shock at the idea, the African leaders set to with a will. Officers were affirmed. A name was chosen, i.e. The Evangelical Mennonite Church of the Congo. (evangelical as opposed to Catholic). Plans were put in place for the next church-wide assembly the following dry season. When in July of that same year anarchy exploded across the country subsequent to an abrupt Belgian withdrawal, the providential timing of the Djoko consultation came into sharp focus.

The Congo Inland Mission becomes the Africa Inter-Mennonite Mission. By the early 1970's, there were two large and growing autonomous Mennonite Churches in the Congo which had stemmed from CIM work. It would have been easy at that point for the CIM board to declare a mission accomplished and to settle back into supportive and fraternal roles with the Congo churches. But instead, in March of 1972, the decision was made to adopt a new name, i.e. the Africa Inter-Mennonite Mission. Implicit in this new name were three basic understandings, i.e. 1) its inter-Mennonite nature was reaffirmed; 2) its identity as a mission organization was reiterated and 3) there was a shift from a unique focus upon Congo to a broader concern for the African continent.

Reaching out to "other sheep". Even as a name change was being processed, the AIMM Board was already aware of the phenomenon of what are known as African Independent Churches or, more recently, African Instituted Churches. They number in the many hundreds all across Bantu Africa. While by and large a spin-off from Christian mission, they have been founded by African initiative and are broadly shaped by their sensitivity to traditional Bantu world views, on the one hand, and by their hunger to find spiritual answers for every day human needs on the other. The AIMM Board had become aware of the near universal and self acknowledged lack of Biblical training among AIC leaders. AIMM was equally aware of a climate of friction and hostility which often existed between AICs and the mission established churches of their areas. Nevertheless, when an invitation was unexpectedly received from a large AIC of Botswana to send missionary personnel to work among them in a Bible training ministry, the decision was made to respond. Adopted guidelines of ministry among them were three fold: 1) to approach and accept them as they are; 2) to invite them to study Scripture with the missionaries as fellow learners while trusting God's Spirit to effect whatever corrective pruning might be needed and 3) to forego the intentional planting of Mennonite Churches among them.

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Entry into Muslim Africa. Possible new areas of ministry in French speaking Africa had long been discussed by the AIMM Board. When in the early 1970's an MCC water development team in drought-stricken western Upper Volta (now known as Burkina Faso) reported finding villages with no resident Christian, the AIMM Board mounted an immediate exploratory visit. Ministry in this Sahel area country would for the first time place AIMM in a predominantly Muslim context and within what is often referred to in missiological circles as the "10/40 window." It soon became obvious that a cluster of unreached and, reportedly, highly resistant ethnic groups did, in fact, reside along the western frontier of that country. With the encouragement of mission groups at work elsewhere in Burkina Faso, the decision was made to try to field a pioneering team of missionaries in that needy area. Previous sporadic evangelistic forays into this frontier region by other groups had proven largely ineffective. After much consultation and prayer, AIMM strategy focused upon a low key presence among the people while learning their customs and language; then as opportunities came, to approach witness via Bible stories from the Old Testament in their own language as a bridge to the story of Jesus. This approach continues.

AIMM in 2004. Once again AIMM stands before circumstances which demand a combination of decision, adjustment and resolve. While the mandate for Mission stands as it always has, the *HOW* and the *WHO* of Christian Mission is undergoing fundamental change. Fully aware of this, the AIMM Council is in process of taking bold and innovative steps both in the light of our history and before the reality of vibrant overseas churches which are seeking opportunity to partner with us in new ways.

May God grant that the story of the AIMM in the future will continue to be that of its past: a story of vision, a story of commitment and a story of His marvelous grace.